

VIDEO

FAQ

Q Is my graphics card able to assist with HD video playback?

A With resolutions as high as 1,920x1,080, 60 frames per second, and the latest compression techniques, it's no surprise that playing HD video can be very taxing for your PC's processor. However, it is possible to take some of that load and hand it over to your graphics card. Part of Microsoft's DirectX standard is DirectX Video Acceleration (DXVA), which provides a standard for hardware acceleration of video decoding.

Both ATI and Nvidia have their own video-acceleration brand names. Nvidia's PureVideo and ATI's Avivo both assist with the playback of video files. The main goal is smooth playback of H.264 HD video such as that found on some Blu-ray and HD-DVD movie releases. But each claims to have its own range of quality-enhancing features for other, less-demanding file formats too.

If you have a modern graphics card, either an Nvidia 6000 series or Radeon X1000 series, video acceleration should be possible. However, you may have to update your DVD-playing software to take full advantage. For more details, go to <http://tinyurl.com/tf76v> for Nvidia cards, or <http://tinyurl.com/y4sdzo> for ATI ones.

Seth Barton

Notebooks, video and games expert

seth@computersshopper.co.uk



ATMT 320GB H855 Mobile Media HDD

★★★★★

£190 inc VAT

The SCART connector is large and can be a pain to plug in, but it does offer an excellent RGB video signal along with stereo sound. Also known as the Euroconnector, it's often omitted from hardware not originally intended for the European market. Because of this, the H855 is the first hard disk media player we've seen with a SCART output.

It's an external hard disk with video and audio outputs so you can play back media files from it directly. Simply copy the files from your PC via USB, then carry the drive to your living room and watch them on TV. It doesn't have an LCD screen, so you have to plug it into a television to select the files. The plastic casing feels sturdy and the slim remote control tucks away neatly in the base.

As well as the SCART connector there's a number of other sockets on the rear. There are two mini-jack outputs, the first for composite video and stereo audio output, while the second is for component video output. This doesn't support HD, unfortunately, but will output progressive scan video. Finally, there's a coaxial S/PDIF digital audio output, which can send AC3 (Dolby Digital) data from video files to a surround-sound decoder. All the leads you need are provided except, annoyingly, a SCART lead.

The player supports a range of video file formats, including MPEG1, MPEG2 (including VOB files direct from DVD, as long as they're not encrypted), and MPEG4 (including Xvid and DivX). There's MP3 support for music and JPEG photo viewing, too.

Video quality was good with a wide range of test files. VOB files

SUMMARY

- ✓ SCART connector
- ✓ Remote is neatly stored beneath
- ✗ No HD support

HARD DISK MEDIA PLAYER 320GB hard disk, USB interface, SCART, composite, component, S-video and stereo outputs. Supports MP3, JPEG, MPEG 1/2/4, DivX, Xvid, VOB
PART CODE A89GK
SUPPLIER www.maplin.co.uk 08704 296000
DETAILS www.atmt.co.uk



played back smoothly and looked identical to the way they would appear on a simple DVD player.

Music quality from our MP3s was fine, but you can't browse through your tracks while listening to one and there's no playlist support. Photo viewing is severely hampered by the low resolution of PAL TV (720x576) and the scaling is not the best we've seen, leaving the images badly pixelated.

The onscreen interface is simplistic, with icons for file types beside the filenames. Just browse through the folders on the hard disk to find what you want. It's controlled by the remote control, which is clearly laid out. Controls during play are well implemented with smooth fast forwarding and rewinding at up to 8x normal speed. Inside the casing is 320GB IDE hard

disk. It's a big chunk of storage, but you'll pay only £90 for a similarly sized external hard disk without the media capabilities.

If you can't be bothered to set up a home network and stream media files to your living room, the H855 is a good alternative. It's not cheap but it does everything we expect of it and you get plenty of storage, too.

Seth Barton

Also consider...

SLINGMEDIA Slingbox

★★★★★

£180 inc VAT



The Slingbox allows you to watch television anywhere in the world, as if you were sitting in your own living room. It has SCART and S-video inputs, so you can plug in whichever set-top boxes you want. It's simple to use, and even includes onscreen mock-ups of your remote controls.

This is a great product that's essential if you can't live without your TV.



VIDEO STREAMING DEVICE SCART and S-video inputs, Freeview tuner, IR transmitter, 10/100 Ethernet port
PART CODE SB150-110 SUPPLIER www.pcworld.co.uk
DETAILS www.slingmedia.com Works well with set-top boxes; easy to set up Can't time-shift Freeview FULL REVIEW Sep 2006

FREECOM DVB-T USB Stick

★★★★★

£28 inc VAT

This was the best digital USB tuner in our Labs test in *Shopper* October 2006. It's easy to get up and running and found all the expected Freeview TV and radio channels. Video quality from our rooftop aerial was very good. There's an excellent EPG, so it's easy to plan your viewing and schedule recordings. Sadly, the included mini remote can't control the EPG, having just basic buttons for changing the channel and volume.

Still, at £28 including VAT, you won't find a cheaper or simpler way of watching and recording Freeview TV on your computer.

USB DIGITAL TV TUNER USB Hi-Speed interface, RF input
SUPPLIER Aria 08704 992499 DETAILS www.freecom.com
PART CODE 25451 Good value; good EPG Poor remote control FULL REVIEW Oct 2006



KWORLD DVB-T PE310

★★★★

£70 inc VAT

KWorld's DVB-T PE310 is the second expansion card, after Terratec's Cinergy 2400i DT (*Labs, Shopper* October 2006), we've seen to use the fast PCI-E x1 interface. The extra bandwidth this gives over PCI hasn't been wasted, as KWorld has fitted this card with dual hybrid-digital tuners.

If you find yourself in an area with poor digital reception, you can switch to the old analogue signal and still watch one side while you record a programme on another. Before buying, check you have a free PCI-E x1 slot, as many such slots can be blocked by your graphics card heatsink.

Remember that PCI-E cards work in faster slots too, so you could install this card in a x2 or x4 slot.

The DVB-T PE310 is a low-profile card, so it should fit into smaller media centre-style cases. The card uses standard BDA drivers, so it's fully compatible with Windows XP Media Center (MCE) and a great choice if you're building such a system.

If you're not and you want to use the bundled software, you'll be disappointed. After installation, it takes you to the analogue scanning tool, even if you want to receive only digital channels. It did find all five analogue channels, though. Once into the application, you can select digital from a drop-down list and scan for Freeview channels. Inexplicably this has to be done twice, once for each tuner, although both of them are running from one RF input. It found all the expected channels, but they were ordered by multiplex with ITV1 first, and there's no way to rearrange them.

Once up and running, the first thing you notice is the ugliness of the interface. You



can change the colour of the main window, but it retains its chrome styling. You can open two separate windows to view programmes, each with their own controls. These display any combination of analogue TV, digital TV and FM radio.

You can timeshift two programs simultaneously and manually capture two programmes to your hard disk, although you can't schedule two simultaneous recordings. You can capture analogue video from an S-video or composite source using a breakout cable. There are plenty of capture options, including MPEG 1,2 and 4 at various resolutions.

The EPG is simply a text list of shows and descriptions on the currently selected channel. It doesn't cache information, instead re-acquiring it every time you change channels. You can't

schedule recordings from it, either. It's probably the worst EPG we've seen. Simple now and next information would have been more useful.

As a cheap dual tuner card for building an MCE PC it's excellent value. But if you want to use a TV tuner under Windows XP, Terratec's Cinergy 2400i DT is better.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Dual tuners; MCE compatible
- ✗ Disappointing EPG
- ✗ Hard-to-use software

PCI-EXPRESS TV TUNER PCI-Express x1 interface, dual hybrid tuners, RF, S-video, composite and phono inputs
PART CODE PE310
SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk 08707 554747
DETAILS www.kworldcomputer.com

CHOOSING A... DV Camera

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

CCD: 800,000 pixels
ZOOM: 10x optical/300x digital
VIDEO PORTS: FireWire out, S-video out
MONITORING: Mono viewfinder, 2½in colour LCD
MEDIA: MiniDV tape
STILLS CAPTURE: 640x480 to tape
EXTRAS: Remote control
Recommended minimum in grey

1 If you just want to make home movies, a £200 digital video (DV) camera with the specs shown above will be fine. A range of auto-exposure modes will ensure you get decent results in all conditions. The LCD screen provides easy playback on location, while the remote control allows for comfortable viewing on the sofa. If you'll be using the zoom a lot, concentrate on the optical zoom specification. Check the battery life, which should preferably be 90 minutes or more, and consider budgeting for an extra battery.

2 To edit video, get a model that provides DV-in. You can transfer edited footage back to MiniDV tape and run off VHS copies through the camera's S-video out. Cameras with S-video in can often be used to capture analogue video.

3 Enthusiasts will pay extra for a more flexible camera. Good manual focus and a colour viewfinder make for better camerawork, an external microphone transforms your audio and good battery and charger options keep you filming for longer. A high-resolution CCD might improve video quality, but while this and a flash memory slot will make your DV camera double as a digital camera, quality will be basic. For the best-quality video, look for a model with three CCDs. This gives more realistic colour reproduction and reduces picture noise to a minimum.

4 Miniature DV cameras, especially those that use tiny MicroMV tapes or memory cards, may tempt gadget-lovers, but picture quality could be compromised. Cameras that replace tape with a hard disk or DVD are more useful, making your footage more manageable.

5 If you're serious about filmmaking, £1,500 buys you a DV camera with superb optics, three CCDs and the requisite connectors to attach equally expensive professional AV accessories. High Definition camcorders are available, and worth considering if you have an HD TV.

CANON MV960

PRICE CUT!

★★★★★

£237 inc VAT



This budget DV camera is designed to shoot video in widescreen to match your living room TV. It also has a widescreen LCD to help you frame shots. The controls are self-explanatory and there's an easy mode for beginners.

The MV960 shoots great video. Colours look excellent, from skin tones to brighter shades, and there's a surprising amount of detail. You will see some picture noise, but it's minimal in decent lighting conditions.

DV CAMERA MiniDV storage, 25x optical zoom, ½in 0.8-megapixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, phono and composite output PART CODE 1207B007AA
SUPPLIER www.amazon.com DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
✓ Widescreen recording and LCD; easy menu system
✗ Low-resolution stills FULL REVIEW Aug 2006



HUMAX Duovisio PVR-9200T

★★★★★

£175 inc VAT

The Duovisio has twin digital tuners to receive Freeview broadcasts, so you can watch one programme while recording another, or record two programmes at once. The 160GB hard disk can hold around 100 hours of recorded shows and enables you to pause and rewind live TV.

Its interface is excellent, making it easy to browse channels and schedule recordings from the one-week EPG. The only disappointment is in its inability to schedule entire series as you can with Sky+. Otherwise, it's a great buy.

HARD DISK RECORDER Two digital tuners, 160GB hard disk, RF input, two SCART, RF, composite, stereo phono, optical S/PDIF output, USB PART CODE PVR-9200T SUPPLIER www.martindawes.net DETAILS www.humaxdigital.com/uk
✓ Twin digital tuner; easy-to-use interface ✗ Minor scheduling problems FULL REVIEW Jun 2006

